



TITLE:

Reports from the Field : Wamba, Zaire : Economic Difficulties in Zaire and the Disappearing Taboo against Hunting Bonobos in the Wamba Area

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conducted there have been published. This site has recently come under the threat of poachers. Originally, to kill bonobos was a taboo for the people of Wamba and they did not consider bonobos as game. But in recent years, this taboo is beginning to disappear.

There are 6 groups of bonobos living in the Wamba forest, and 2 groups, E1 and E2, have been studied in the greatest detail. In 1984, the first case of poaching was found by one of our trackers. Moreover, people in the Wamba region captured bonobos at least two times by order of the Zaire government in 1986 and 1987. After that, direct evidence of poaching was found (e.g. someone had bonobo meat, some bonobo parts were found in a villager's house, etc.), and the bonobo population of E1 and E2 began to rapidly decrease. The number of disappearances was considerably greater than the recorded death rate noted between 1975 and 1983 before poaching was suspected to have started. We now believe that bonobos have been poached continuously since 1984. In 1990 the Wamba forest and the Ilongo forest, located on the other side of the Luo river, were made into a scientific reserve to protect the bonobos, the forest, and other animals in it. This 350 km², however, is not large enough to protect the wild bonobo population, and sometimes the antipoaching rules of this reserve are not observed.

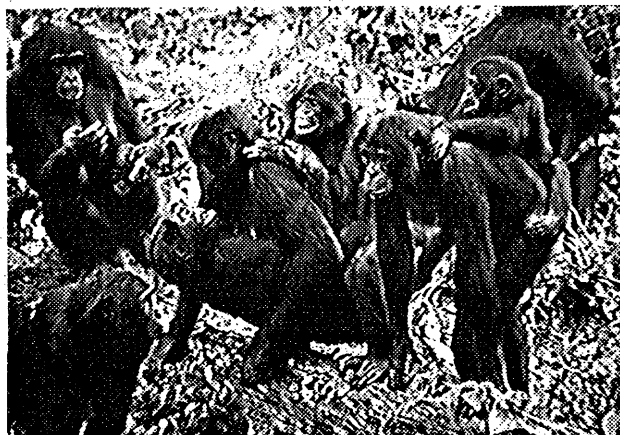
In 1991, a riot broke out in Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire, and research at Wamba was stopped for nearly 2 and a half years. Many bonobos appeared to have died or disappeared during this period. In April 1994 the members of E1 were censused and it was found that 10 bonobos including 2 young females disappeared during this break in research. I stayed at Wamba from February to July 1995 to do research, conduct conservation activity and to census the members of E1 and E2 groups. All E1 members checked in the previous year were still alive, but the number of bonobos in E2 had greatly decreased from what was observed five to six years ago. It can be concluded that most of the poaching was done during the absence of Japanese researchers.

What follows is a report of an incident which was observed during this time. The E1 group almost always stays in the Wamba forest but the range of E2 is larger and they spend about one fourth of their time in the neighboring forest which is not part of the reserve. In May, E2 went into the neighboring forest and then returned. After their return to the Wamba forest their behavior toward humans changed drastically. They dispersed into small sized parties which always moved in the tree tops, making it impossible for researchers to track them on the ground. It is possible that this was due to being attacked or threatened by humans in the neighboring forest. This may be taken as one source of indirect evidence that poaching or an attempt to do so had taken place. Fortunately, no bonobos were killed at this

WAMBA, ZAIRE

Economic Difficulties in Zaire and the Disappearing Taboo against Hunting Bonobos in the Wamba Area

Research began at Wamba, Zaire, a study site for wild bonobos, in 1973. Since then many studies



Bonobos feeding sugarcane (Photo by Y. Tashiro)

time. The bad news is that people in neighboring villages are now making arrows with poison, a once obsolete practice.

It is not only the people of other villages that have come to consider bonobos as game. During my stay I employed five villagers to patrol the reserve. On several occasions they heard gun reports and actually saw people from Wamba and other villages walk in the reserve with guns or poison arrows, a practice strictly prohibited by law. I myself also heard gun reports. Each time we reported these incidences to the local government authorities. I think such measures have had some positive effect towards protecting bonobos. However, this is not the best way because local government authorities usually release the offender soon afterwards, giving him only a slight penalty for his offense. Now, if the trackers see poaching during our absence, they have become reluctant to report the offense or directly accuse the poacher. Once when someone did, our tracker was instead arrested by the local authorities and unfairly penalized. Under such condition our trackers are afraid to take action against poachers.

Many local people respect the bonobos and say such things like "bonobos cannot speak language, but they live the same life as man.", "bonobos and men are like brothers." However, others have threatened to kill them. I once heard a person from a neighboring village say, "You know, the people in Wamba are given jobs and commodities, and in return cooperate with the Japanese. If we cannot profit from protecting bonobos as well, we have no concern whether bonobos should be killed or not." The biggest cause of poaching of bonobos thus seems to be the serious situation of Zaire's economy. The economy has gone from bad to worse and it is now even more difficult for people to obtain the daily necessities of life such as soap, salt and cloth. People kill and sell bonobos as well as other animals to get money for these things. The want for these and other items has grown, influenced by increased access to information by radio,

printed matter and travellers coming from the bigger towns and cities. This situation has caused them to go against their old customs and break the taboo against killing bonobos. There is a serious need for us to find a way to stop the poaching and to protect the forest and improve the lives of the villagers.

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